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**UNIT-I**

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**Structure**

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**1.0 OBJECTIVE**

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The objective of the lesson is to acquaint distant learners with the argument and style of Aldous Huxley's essay 'Tragedy and the Whole Truth'.

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**1.1. ALDOUS HUXLEY : LIFE**

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Aldous Leonard Huxley was born in Surrey, England, in 1894. Educated at Eton and Balliol College, at the age of seventeen he developed *keratitis punctata*, a form of eye-disease from which he later partially recovered using Bates method. The disease severely affected his vision. Incidentally, Huxley once humorously remarked that poor eyesight mercifully saved him from the harrowing experience of watching cinema which magnifies everything to 'Brobdingian proportions'. Huxley was born in a family of eminent scientists, his grandfather being the famous biologist T.H. Huxley, popularly known as 'Darwin's bull dog'. No wonder that Huxley's first love was not literature, but science. He himself once admitted 'Even if I could be Shakespeare, I think I shall still choose to be Faraday'. It is strange that in later life such a mind should incline to crank science, look for extra-sensory perception, write volumes on abstract metaphysics and regularly ingest psychedelic drug to open what he calls the doors of perception. But his interest in science manifests in his writing not only as a predilection for scientific terminology and analogy drawn from science, but also in the form of a tension between a scientifically regulated society and a society free from technophobia. Huxley left England with his wife Maria Nys in 1837'to settle in California. He lived there till his death in 1963. although



he did not get US citizenship because he refused to fight in defence of America. As a man Huxley was rather non-hedonist in his attitude to life. He once remarked: 'It is not the hope of heaven that prevents me from leading what is technically known as a life of pleasure, it is simply my temperament. I happen to find the life of pleasure boring and painful'. Huxley once ruefully remarked: 'A majority of young people seem to develop mental arteriosclerosis forty years before they get the physical kind'. Happily Huxley continued to grow as an author till his death.

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## 1.2 ALDOUS HUXLEY : WORKS

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Aldous Huxley was a prolific writer. He wrote poems, short stories, plays, travelogues, novels and a large number of essays covering a wide range of topics. Of his travelogues the most famous is *Jesting Pilate* (1926). It is a vivid account of Huxley's experience as a traveller, graced with his deep reflection on life and time. In 'Benaras' for example, while humorously recounting how a 'sacred bull' at one swoop eats up the 'morning's charity' from a dozing beggar's bowl near the Benaras ghat, Huxley remarks: 'Being stupid and having no imagination, animals often behave far more sensibly than men ... While the animal, obedient to its instinct, goes quietly about its business, man, being endowed with reason and imagination, wastes half his time and energy in doing things that are completely idiotic'. In 'Labuan' having narrated the high-drama of overpowering an obstinate Malayan young man with dagger Huxley comments: 'An individual has only to refuse to play the game of existence according to current rules to throw the rule observing players into bewildered consternation', an observation which is highly relevant in our times of mounting terrorism.

Later in his career Huxley wrote two philosophical treatises — *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945) and *The Doors of Perception* (1954). The former discusses 'universal set of truths and values common to all peoples and all cultures'. The latter is about how the human mind filters perception and how words reduce awareness and how to be shaken out of this inertia of the mind. Both the works are of poor literary value although a mystic or a parapsychologist might find Huxley's argument interesting enough. Orwell most probably had such writings in mind when he described Huxley as an 'inside-the-whale' writer, a writer who observes life through a translucent 'layer of insulating blubber'. Of the eleven novels that Huxley wrote *Point Counter Point* (1928), *Brave New World* (1932), *Ends and Means* (1937) and *Island* (1962) deserve special mention. *Point Counter Point* is about the complex amorous expeditions of Walter Bidlake presented in a style that resembles musical counterpoint where two or more strains of tune run together. *Ends and Means* shows how in achieving the ideals of love, peace and justice it becomes difficult for man to reconcile means with ends. Half a decade before *Ends and Means* Huxley wrote *Brave New World*, decidedly his *tour de force*. Originally planned as a reaction against H G Wells' *Men Like Gods*, it is a dystopic vision of human society in 632 AF



(After Ford). Incidentally, Ford automobile came to the market in 1908. In the envisioned world state reproduction would be mechanized with embryo growing not in human womb but in bottles. Cultivation of intellect and expression of emotion would be totally forbidden. Comfort and happiness would replace Truth and Beauty as ideals of World State. The inhabitants of this World State subjugated by a mindless totalitarian World Controller would not resent slavery as they would be made to 'love their servitude'. Sensuality would be the ethical norm and the people of this strange world who keep God in safe and Ford on the shelves would recreate through drugs. In the novel Huxley subverts scientific optimism and shows that science & technology may rid the world of the plague of poverty and ill-health; but if machinery is deified and life is preconditioned, human civilization would inevitably lose its cultural diversity and man would be reduced to a very low state of a mere cog in a social system. It has lightly been said in *Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*: "Modern developments in biological engineering and psycho chemistry have preserved, and perhaps increased, its relevance as an exercise in alarmism." *Island*, written thirty years after *Brave New World*, shows how Huxley's vision has matured over the years. Instead of expressing any misgiving about a technologically engineered society Huxley here blends scientific speculation with philosophy. The novel takes us to a dream-land of perfection where the materially advanced West and the contemplative East co-exist in happy harmony. Huxley who in a letter to his father found novel writing uninteresting ('the mere business of telling a story interests me less and less') once admitted that novel-writing is not his forte: "I don't think myself as a congenital novelist." In another interview in 1952 Huxley described himself as 'an essayist who sometimes writes novels and biographies'. Indeed, it is in non-fictional prose that we find the fingerprint of vintage Huxley.

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### 1.3 HUXLEY AND THE ESSAY

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It was Francis Bacon who first used the term 'essay' in English in 1597. Derived from French 'essay', meaning attempt, the word originally was used in the sense of something tentative, lacking finish. This is evident from Dr. Johnson's definition of the term 'essay' in his *Dictionary* as 'a loose sally of the mind, an irregular indigested piece, not a regular and orderly performance'. Subsequently it came to signify a piece of prose writing, usually short, on any subject. It may be a serious and methodically argued discussion on a subject written in an impersonal style. Like the lyric it may also be, as Alexander Smith maintains, 'moulded by some central mood - whimsical, serious, or satirical': 'Give the mood, and the essay, from the first sentence to the last, grows around it, as the cocoon grows around the silkworm'. Formal or informal, subjective or objective, impassioned or analytical, the essay refers to so widely varied forms of writing that it seems 'definable' neither by 'what it says' nor by 'how it says what it says' (Synder). Hugh Walker has pertinently remarked: 'A term so elastic means little or nothing, just because it means



anything'. One agrees with A.C Benson that 'the point of the essay is not the subject, for any subject will suffice, but the charm of personality.... The only thing necessary is that the thing or the thought should be vividly apprehended, enjoyed, felt to be beautiful, and expressed with a certain gusto'.

Himself an essayist of great distinction, Huxley gives his views on the art of the essayist in the preface to *Collected Essays*. Quoting D. H. Lawrence who considered the novelist 'superior to the saint, the scientist, the philosopher and the poet' Huxley observes: 'What is true of the novel is only a little less true of the essay. For, like the novel, the essay is a literary device for saying almost everything about almost anything'. Huxley classifies essays into three types, what he calls 'three-poled frame of reference': personal-autobiographical, objective-factual and abstract-universal. According to Huxley, 'each kind of essay has its special merits and defects.' The personal essay may degenerate into whimsical self-indulgence. The objective may lapse into something merely informative. The abstract may lie far from the 'living reality of our immediate experience': 'The constantly abstract, constantly impersonal essayist is apt to give us not oracles but algebra'. Huxley thinks that the most richly satisfying essays are those which make the best 'of all the three worlds in which it is possible for the essay to exist': 'Freely, effortlessly thought and feeling move in these consummate works of art, hither and thither between the essay's three poles - from the personal to the universal, from the abstract back to the concrete, from the objective datum to the inner experience'. Huxley's own essays are splendidly chequered in 'size and shape and color'. A rich mine of intellectual gems, the finest of these are at once personal, factual and universal. They amaze us with the author's 'omni-directional intelligence'. From literature to science, politics to philosophy, culture to metaphysics, — everything that engages the perceptive mind inspires Huxley to review and re-probe it from a new perspective. In range and variety, analytical depth, clarity of thought, perspicuity of judgement they are literally fascinating. Huxley's fictions may exemplify the 'contradictions enmeshing the bourgeois intellectual' as Adorno contends; but Huxley's intellectual stand on the subject discussed in each essay is free from both prejudice and confusion. Clive James has rightly observed: 'To read all the essays in sequence is like being enrolled in the college of your dreams'.

Huxley's essays are marked by 'transparency of style, seriousness of purpose and distinction of personality', the three virtues of a good essay, according to Douglas Brown. Michael Thorpe rightly points out that although what Huxley says is deeply informed with learning, it is never too abstract: 'his prose is clear, logically constructed, and intended to make us think without hectoring us'. Huxley's prose is also smartly modern; it fulfils all the criteria mentioned by Thorpe. First, it is plain in style, as Huxley deliberately avoids all 'artifice and ornament'. Secondly, Huxley consistently speaks out in his own voice and records the movements of his mind. He refuses to "fake his impressions or shelter behind a 'literary style'". Thirdly, Huxley's prose seldom tries to dress up inadequate subject-matter under 'elaborate rhythmical pattern of persuasion', as found in the so called *poetic prose* of many poor prose-writers of the nineteenth century.



## 1.4 TRAGEDY AND HUXLEY'S OPINION ABOUT IT

'Tragedy' etymologically means goat song, for Greek '*tragos*' carried the meaning of 'he-goat'. This curious association of tragedy with goat may be either due to the fact that the chorus in earlier Greek tragedies was dressed like satyrs in goat skin or more possibly, '*tragos*' was the traditional reward of recognition in Greek Society in any competition for tragedy. Be that as it may, tragedy, as we understand it is a spectacle of suffering. Since it is a play of suffering, it dramatizes how a man is crushed by the adversity surrounding him. Paradoxically enough, in tragedy man is crushed but not humbled — the failure of his endeavor does not detract from but add to his glory. This is because tragedy is, as Bonamy Dobree points out, a glorification of human capacity for endurance. What is implied is that tragic suffering is basically non-passive in nature. The protagonist fights against the odds and although he cannot triumph, his struggle is not inglorious. It is worth pointing out that it is the quality, the intensity of suffering, not the amount, which makes suffering truly tragic. And yet in a sense the tragic protagonist is a victim of disproportionate suffering — he is a man more sinned against than sinning. Lest the moral design of the world should crack at the sight of unmerited suffering, the tragic protagonist is made somewhat responsible for his downfall. But there is a difference between the sufferings of a villain whose downfall we relish and the suffering of a hero whose misfortune moves us to pity. The calamity of a villain is well deserved, that of the tragic hero, if at all, is only partly deserved.

Suffering dramatized in tragedy is not pessimistic in nature — it leads to some enlightenment, some heightened awareness of the puniness of man, or the inevitability of death or the futility of human endeavor and the like. No wonder that in many classical tragedies man is placed in a situation involving moral conflict where one must choose between two rights and by such choice be guilty of moral transgression. While this gives us deeper insight into the mystery of existence, it also makes us feel that some irrational, incomprehensible force continues to disrupt the benevolent design of the world. It is due to the operation of this cosmic law that virtue and good can never prevail in this horribly imperfect world. Incidentally, Steiner thinks that the post-Cartesian world is incapable of true tragic vision because living in a time of rational empiricism modern man is sceptical about the existence and operation of any such blind, inimical force. We have a tendency to rationally explore the causes of our suffering and such rational explanations spoil the utter and irrevocable fatalism that is the staple of a good tragedy. As suffering in tragedy is aestheticised, the observer is simultaneously drawn towards and withdrawn from the sufferer. The simultaneous evocation of pity and terror unites these discordant impulses 'in an ordered single response' and this is the essence of tragedy, according to L.A. Richards. In Chapters 5, 23, 24 and 26 of his *Poetics* Aristotle makes a comparative analysis of tragedy and epic. Both are representation of serious action in dignified verse (Ch. 5), both have organic unity (Ch. 23), both have plots involving *peripety* and *anagnorisis* (Ch. 24). But then epic is written in a single metre (Hexameter) and in narrative style (Ch. 5). All



parts of epic are included in tragedy although some parts of tragedy - Music and Spectacle - are not found in epic (Ch. 5). As it is not stage-bound, epic can freely represent multiple incidents going on simultaneously (Ch. 24). Aristotle admits that though the appeal of epic is to the cultivated audience (Ch. 26), tragedy is superior to epic. The principal grounds for this Aristotelian partiality for tragedy are:

- (i) Epic offers more opening for the improbable or the 'marvelous' (Ch. 24)
- (ii) Tragedy is more concentrated and requires less space than epic for the attainment of its end (Ch. 26).

It is interesting to see that although in Chapter 26 Aristotle observes that the 'plurality of actions to some extent dilutes the effect of epic; in Chapter 24 he considers it an advantage. The relevant portion in Bywater's translation reads:

Whereas in epic poetry the narrative form makes it possible for one to describe a number of simultaneous incidents; and these, if germane to the subject, increase the body of the poem. This then is a gain to the Epic, tending to give it grandeur, and also variety of interest and room for episodes of diverse kinds.

The seed of Huxley's essay 'Tragedy and the Whole Truth' (from *Music at Night*, 1931) may be traced to this passage of Aristotle. Tragedy may be more concentrated, but, for being exclusive in approach it is an art form of partial truth. By contrast, epic or novel, generally considered as prose epic, is more inclusive and therefore it is truly literature of the Whole Truth. It is worth pointing out that the sense in which Huxley uses the word 'Truth' is somewhat narrow. It has not been used in the ethico-philosophical sense of a quality or state which is in accordance with reason, correct principles or accepted standard, which is proof against fallacy, inaccuracy and adulteration, and as such assumed to be unvarying and ideal in nature. Huxley uses it in the sense of those aspects of life, which are generally filtered out by the writers of tragedy as irrelevant. Epic or novel according to Huxley contains the Whole Truth because it never bothers about *chemical purity*; it rather embraces what is apparently believed to be trivial and aesthetically unimportant. Thus considered, tragedy cannot be looked upon as superior to epic or novel as held by Aristotle. That it is not just a passing idea but a settled conviction of Huxley is evident from what he said long afterwards in an interview published in *The Paris Review*. Asked whether he still thinks that fiction gives a fuller view of life than tragedy, Huxley replied:

Yes I believe that tragedy is not necessarily the highest form. I can conceive something much more inclusive and yet equally sublime, something which is adumbrated in the plays of Shakespeare. I think that in some way the tragic and comic elements can be more totally fused...As I say in that essay, Homer has a kind of fusion of these elements, but on a very simple-minded level.

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## 1.5 "TRAGEDY AND THE WHOLE TRUTH"

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The title is somewhat confusing because the essay shows that tragedy is exclusive in its approach - it never attempts to give us the Whole Truth. The essay posits tragedy against art forms that tell us the Whole Truth. So it is actually tragedy *versus* the Whole



Truth. However, the title makes sense if we assume 'its relation to' (understood in the title) before 'the whole Truth'. The essay begins dramatically with Huxley's appreciatory remarks on Homeric presentation of human response to the tragedy of six of Odysseus' bravest companions being eaten up by Scylla, as found in *Odyssey* Book XI. It was 'the most dreadful and lamentable sight' ever seen by Odysseus. Yet Odysseus did not immediately break down in despair. He and his men went ashore, 'expertly' prepared their food, satisfied their hunger and only then thought of their lost friends, wept, and fell asleep. According to Huxley, this is 'the Whole Truth', not just bits of the truth found elsewhere. So Huxley's criterion of value is truth without which no book would be accepted as a good book. Huxley distinguishes literary truth from mathematical truth, which consists in precise calculation ( $2+2=4$ ), from Historical truth which consists in precise information (the accession of Queen Victoria in 1837) and from scientific truth, which consists in precise verifiable conclusion (187,000 miles a second is the velocity of light). Huxley defines the truth of literature as 'acceptable verisimilitude'. It is found when experiences recorded in literature correspond with our actual or potential experiences, i.e. experience-based rational inference.

But Huxley extends the scope of literary truth when he distinguishes "acceptable" verisimilitude from 'mere' verisimilitude: 'mere correspondence of experience recorded by the writer with experience remembered or imaginable by the reader is not enough to make a work of art seem "true". Huxley's point is that mere factually correct account of particular events or an experience even when 'corresponding closely with a reader's felt or potential experience such as case-records of a textbook of psychology is not to be confused with literary truth. For Huxley literary truth transcends factual or scientific truth. He calls it 'super-truth'. As good art possesses it, it is 'more probable, more acceptable, more convincing than fact itself.

Incidentally, poetic truth is not the truth of the particular but of the universal. Precepts of philosophy and examples of history are combined in poetry - examples illustrate precepts - the abstract is grasped through the concrete. Paradoxically, universality and truth-value usually do not go together. As soon as we talk about the universality of a thing we assume that its truth-value cannot precisely be ascertained. While A calls a statue beautiful, B disagrees, but both have a sense of beauty otherwise they won't agree or disagree as to its property, beautiful or ugly. So it is simultaneously beautiful and otherwise or, to put it differently, we can never be sure of its status. Tagore's words about the nature of poetic truth are worth quoting here:

নারদ কহিল হাসি সেই সত্য যা রচিবে তুমি  
ঘটে যা তা সব সত্য নহে, কবি তব মনোভূমি  
রামের জন্মস্থান অযোধ্যার চেয়ে সত্য জেনো।

The primary function of the artist is to make the inward outward - to translate his singular vision at the time of creation. An artist is endowed not only with a rare sensibility but also a 'power of communication', according to Huxley. He must have vision and a capacity to 'put things across'. Artists are eminently teachable as well as teachers - they



receive from events more experience than most men and they can also transmit it with extraordinary penetrative force.

After clearing his view on literary truth and what distinguishes an author from common men Huxley sets out to examine the forms of art that express the Whole Truth. In *Odyssey* Homer expresses the Whole Truth in the sense that the experience he presents corresponds 'fairly closely' with ours. Besides, he expresses them with such a penetrative artistic force that what he presents impresses one as plausible and convincing. In Homer, instead of breaking down and weeping for their friends devoured by Scylla, Odysseus and the other survivors eat to satiety, lament and fall asleep. This Huxley calls the Whole Truth because Homer recognizes that even the most haplessly bereaved must eat, that hunger is stronger than sorrow and its satiety takes precedence even over tears: 'Homer refused to treat the theme tragically. He preferred to tell the Whole Truth'.

Huxley next proceeds to argue his point with reference to Fielding who 'like Homer, admits all the facts, shirks nothing.' Whereas writers of tragedy prefer Chemical Purity, Fielding never eschews the irrelevancies. To illustrate his point Huxley refers to one hilarious episode narrated in *Tom Jones* Book XI Chapter 2 entitled 'The Adventures which Sophia met with after her leaving Upton'. Sophia was so fatigued for a long ride that she was incapable of dismounting from the horse without assistance. Perceiving this the landlord tried to lift her from her saddle:

For my land-ford had no sooner received the young lady in his arms, than his feet, which the gout had lately very severely handled, gave way, and down he tumbled; but at the same time, with no less dexterity than gallantry, contrived to throw himself under his charming burthen, so that he alone received any bruises from the fall; for the greatest injury which happened to Sophia, was a violent shock given to her modesty, by an immoderate grin which, at her rising from the ground, she observed in the countenances of most of the bye-standers.

Huxley remarks that in the tragical context 'weight is an irrelevance; heroines should be above the law of gravitation'. But Fielding 'refused to impose the tragedian's veto'; he gives us the Whole Truth.

Huxley now refers to I.A. Richards' observations on tragedy made in *Principles of Literary Criticism*<sup>1</sup> especially his view that the capacity to absorb the untragical and anti-tragical is 'the touchstone of tragic merit.' The relevant passage from Richards' chapter entitled 'The Imagination' is worth quoting:

It is essential to recognize that in the full tragic experience there is no suppression. The mind does not shy away from anything... suppressions and sublimations alike are devices by which we endeavor to avoid issues which might bewilder us. The essence of Tragedy is that it forces us to live for a moment without them ... Tragedy is perhaps the most general, all-accepting, all-ordering experience known. It can take anything into its organization, modifying it so that it finds a place'.

According to Richards, except for six Shakespearean tragic masterpieces, most English and Greek tragic plays are pseudo-tragedies by this standard. Huxley here registers his note of dissent. He contends that the so-called counterpoint, which is considered a great virtue of Shakespearean tragedy, is only apparently a counterpoint. Strictly speaking, in



Shakespeare 'the cynicism is always heroic idealism turned neatly inside out, the irony is a kind of photographic negative of heroic romance.' The 'shadow-replica' or 'photographic negative' of a thing cannot be counted as irrelevance; it is actually a mirror image, with sides reversed. So Richards' point about the inclusiveness of Shakespearean tragedy is not at all tenable according to Huxley. He argues that 'Shakespeare's ironies and cynicisms serve to deepen his tragic world, not widen it.' A Homeric touch to the sorrowing Macduff or a Fieldingesque touch to Desdemona would spoil the tragic fibre of *Macbeth* or *Othello*. Such a touch 'would be true enough to life; but it would not be true to tragic art'. Hence Huxley's emphatic conclusion that 'tragedy and what I have called the Whole Truth are not compatible; where one is the other is not. There are certain things, which even the best, even Shakespearean tragedy cannot absorb into itself.

Huxley next proceeds to explain why tragedy isolates 'a single element out of human experience'. According to Huxley, tragedy omits irrelevancies of life and distills the essence from the Whole Truth because tragedy is 'chemically pure'. Chemically pure art acts on our feelings quickly and intensely; tragedy performs its function of catharsis so effectively because it is 'chemically pure'. Tragedy sifts and knits the elements of our being into an ordered and beautiful pattern as a piece of magnet draws and arranges iron filings. This is true of all tragedies despite individual variations.

If tragedy foregrounds a moment, Wholly Truthful art going beyond the limits of tragedy reveals to us what happened before the moment of catastrophe or what would happen after it or what happened simultaneously elsewhere. If tragedy be an eddy, Wholly Truthful art presents to us the whole river. Even suffering may constitute the corpus of great art. But since in Wholly Truthful art it is placed in 'a wider context', the picture of suffering evokes an altogether different effect here.

To make his point clearer Huxley defines the effect evoked by Wholly Truthful art. The mood evoked is not one of 'heroic exultation' but of 'resignation and acceptance'. Wholly Truthful art, as it is Chemically Impure, never moves us as 'quickly and intensely' as tragedy does, but, paradoxically enough, its effect is more stable. Huxley describes the exultation brought about by tragedy as 'temporary inebriations', although intense, transient in nature. But the mood evoked by art that tells the Whole Truth endures longer. To quote Huxley: 'The catharsis of tragedy is violent and apocalyptic; but the milder catharsis of Wholly-Truthful literature is lasting.

Huxley now turns to contemporary literature and maintains that modern authors, despite their individual differences, are all interested in telling the Whole Truth. This fairly accounts for the decline of tragedy in modern times. Huxley, of course, points out that the Whole Truth is not to be confused with naturalistic elaboration and detailing. One need not laboriously catalogue every object within sight to tell the Whole Truth; this may be done through suggestive details: 'A book can be written in terms of pure phantasm and yet, by implication, tell the Whole Truth.'

Huxley ends the essay with a comment on the future of tragedy. Although modern stage has not seen many tragic masterpieces produced, Huxley thinks that tragedy is



passing through a period of eclipse, it is not doomed. Man has always much weakness for the emotional kick (a sharp pleasurable thrill) effected by a tragedy. Besides, tragedy is too valuable an art form to be allowed to die. Huxley's conclusion is that the human spirit 'has need' both of what is Chemically Impure and what is Chemically Pure, the literature of Partial Truth and that of the Whole Truth.

Huxley's attitude to tragedy is to some extent ambiguous. If tragedy be a literature of partial truth it is inferior to epic or novel, for what grasps the Whole Truth must be better. But what is chemically purer cannot be inferior to what is chemically impure. Intriguingly enough, Huxley is talking of chemical, as distinct from aesthetic, purity. Consider also that in the last paragraph Huxley observes that we have an inborn tendency to be moved by tragic plays, however insipid, 'against our better judgement'. Is it a Platonic indictment on the debilitating effect of tragedy in particular (and here Huxley parts company with Plato who would banish even epic from his ideal republic)? But that Huxley is not so much against tragedy is clear from the word 'valuable' used about tragedy: "Tragedy is too valuable to be allowed to die." So it seems that 'chemical' has not been used pejoratively in the essay. Huxley actually refuses to place Tragedy and Epic / Novel on a Superior-Inferior scale. What Huxley is driving at is that distillation of the essence of experience, that is, conscious omission of life's irrelevancies, is, not a demerit of tragic art; it is its unique feature.

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## 1.6 STYLE

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Huxley, who once faulted the Taj for its dry elegance and poverty of imagination, is well-known for the originality of his approach. In 'Tragedy and the Whole Truth' he differs both from Richards who thinks that Tragedy is all-absorbing and from Aristotle who holds that tragedy is superior to the epic. He is not interested in experiment with narrative style; Joyce's *Ulysses* struck him as 'one of the dullest books ever written.' Lucidity and precision are two great virtues of Huxley's prose-style. One seldom comes across a long-winded sentence with trailing relative clauses in Huxley's essays. Neither stiff, nor slovenly, it is austere, purged of the superfluity of ornament. One example will suffice: 'Indeed, it is precisely because these authors shirk nothing that their books are not tragical'. But the grace of literary prose flavored with genial humor is never to be missed. Consider, for example the last sentence of the paragraph where Huxley discusses the Fieldingesque way of telling the Whole Truth in *Tom Jones*: "And sure enough, that brief and pearly gleam of Sophia's charming posterior was sufficient to scare the Muse of Tragedy out of *Tom Jones* just as, more than five and twenty centuries before, the sight of stricken men first eating, then remembering to weep, then forgetting their tears in slumber had scared her out of the *Odyssey*". Another important aspect of his prose style is his analytical acumen and his ability to draw insightful and original conclusions: 'Shakespeare's ironies and cynicisms serve to deepen his tragic world, but not to widen



it' or 'Tragedy is chemically pure. Hence its power to act quickly and intensely on our feelings' or 'The catharsis of tragedy is violent and apocalyptic: but the milder catharsis of Wholly-Truthful literature is lasting'. These generalizations never perplex us but invite us to rethink and re-examine. So it is wrong to depreciate Huxley's talent as just a 'talent for throwaway apothegms'. He always writes 'in a clear-sighted, detached manner, appealing primarily to the reason'. Huxley's prose is agreeably allusive: "The fruit of his considerable erudition is lavished on his readers in flattering profusion". The present essay, for instance, uses pertinent allusions to Homer, Fielding, Dickens, and Shakespeare. But Huxley's allusions are never formidably academic like Joyce's, nor are they decorative or forced. Orwell once deplored that the "whole tendency of modern prose is away from concreteness". Huxley is one of those few authors who may be regarded as honorable exceptions in this regard. Even when the subject in question is abstract, his prose is anything but abstract. Huxley avoids vagueness in every respect. He first recounts an episode from Homer's epic which is illustrative of what he calls Whole Truth, then proceeds to define literary truth and then only having prepared the grounds examines how tragedy is related to it.

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## 1.7 SUMMING UP

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Aldous Huxley, born in an educated and culturally advanced family, was a prolific writer. He wrote a number of travelogues, screenplays, biographies and critically acclaimed novels. But it is his essays that have earned him a lasting fame as an author. Written in a straightforward language, his essays are serious in tone, clear-sighted in conception, sharp in analysis and convincing in their style of presentation.

Aristotle thinks that tragedy is superior to epic as a form of art, for it is more concentrated, more focused, leaving no scope for the effect to get diluted or dissipated. L.A. Richards whose yardstick for measuring tragic excellence is high indeed, thinks that tragedy is quite comprehensive - it can incorporate all experiences - suppressing or omitting nothing. As a theorist Huxley makes a space for himself by questioning the arguments of both Aristotle and Richards. He disagrees with Aristotle who ranks tragedy above epic and faults Richards' point that Tragedy is all-absorbing in scope. He contends that Tragedy distills the essence of experience leaving out irrelevancies. For this chemical purity though its emotional impact is more intense, tragedy can never grasp the Whole Truth. Yet Huxley considers tragedy as valuable as the form of art that presents the Whole Truth of life.

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## 1.8 GLOSSARY

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**Andre Gide:** French novelist (1860-1951), essayist, critic, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature (1947). *The Immoralist* (1902), *Strait is the Gate* (1924), *Journals* (1889-1949) are his important works.



**Chemical Purity:** Illustrates Huxley's predilection for scientific terminology. The phrase has been used in the sense of the distillation of life's irrelevancies in tragedy. When elements combine through interaction of substances, the process may be described as chemical. What is chemically pure, therefore, is pure to the very atoms or molecules. It is not apparent but quintessential.

**D. H. Lawrence:** English novelist (1885-1930), poet and writer of short stories. *Sons and Lovers* (1913), *The Rainbow* (1915), *Women in Love* (1916) and the once controversial work *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) are his most popular and critically acclaimed works.

**Ernest Hemingway:** American novelist (1899-1961) and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature (1954). Author of modern classics like *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) and *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952).

**Franz Kafka:** Distinguished German novelist (1883-1924), author of great works like *The Trial* (1925) and *The Castle* (1926), both published posthumously.

**Marcel Proust:** French novelist (1871-1922), author of *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913-27).

**Mrs. Micawber:** Character in Dickens' autobiographical novel *David Copperfield*. She is fond of citing what her father said in season and out of season. The precise reference is not clear here. But most probably Huxley has in mind the following words reported to have been said by her father: 'Emma's form is fragile but her grasp of a subject is inferior to none'.

**Our friends etc:** Last two lines of William Wordsworth's sonnet 'To Toussaint L'Ouverture', here slightly misquoted on purpose, for in the original the first word of the excerpt is *Thy*, not *Our*.

**Phedre:** Jean Racine's enormously successful tragedy written in 1677. Drawn upon Euripides's *Hyppolytus* it dramatizes the tragic consequences of Phedre's incestuous passion for her step-son Hippolyte.

**Scylla:** Scylla, one of the two monsters (the other being Charybdis) mentioned in Homer's *Odyssey*. She is "a horribly grotesque sea monster, with six long necks equipped with grisly heads, each of which contained three rows of sharp teeth. Her body consisted of twelve canine legs and a fish's tail".



**Sophia:** Sophia Western, daughter of Squire Western, the sweet-natured heroine of *Tom Jones*. The character is known to have been modelled on Charlotte Cradock whom Fielding married in 1734.

**Tom Jones:** Henry Fielding's (1707-54) comic epic in prose published in 1749. Tom, the protagonist of this picaresque novel, after a series of faux pax wins the love of the heroine Sophia for the natural generosity of his heart.

**Verisimilitude:** Verisimilitude etymologically means true-like (< *verus*, true). It is used about life-like art, art that has an illusion of reality. Although O. Henry in 'The Last Leaf' presents verisimilitude as the criterion of aesthetic excellence, greatness of art is seldom judged in terms of how flawlessly it conforms to real life. That is why *photographic representation* is considered a pejorative expression in literary criticism.

**Whole Truth:** In philosophy Truth is a property ascribed to a proposition; it is a quality rather than a relation. A proposition is believed to be true if it corresponds to fact, if it is universal and unvarying in nature, if its validity does not depend on whether one believes it or not. However, the term has not been used here in this philosophical sense. For Huxley, Whole Truth means a comprehensive view of life, without any filtration or distillation of so called inessentials.

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## 1.9 SHORT QUESTIONS

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1. With which episode does Huxley open his essay and why?
2. What does Huxley mean by the 'Whole Truth'?
3. How does Huxley define literary truth?
4. What quality, other than a sensibility, is an artist endowed with?
5. What is 'super-truth' and what does Huxley say about it?
6. What does Huxley mean when he says that "Tragedy is chemically pure"?
7. Which 'five obviously significant and important contemporary writers' does Huxley mention and why?
8. With what opinion does Huxley end his essay?
9. How does Huxley interpret the 'counterpoints' in Shakespeare?

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## 1.10 BROAD QUESTIONS

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1. Explain how Huxley argues his point that tragedy lacks the whole Truth?
2. Where does Huxley differ from Aristotle and Richards in his attitude to tragedy? Cite examples from the text.



3. What sort of catharsis is effected by tragedy and how is it different from catharsis effected by wholly-Truthful art?
4. In the tragedies of Shakespeare, "the cynicism is always heroic idealism turned neatly inside out, the irony is a kind of photographic negative of heroic romance".  
-Explain
5. What is Huxley's view on the future of tragedy and how is it related to the central argument of the essay?
6. What are the distinctive features of Huxley's prose style as revealed in the essay?